

Duo

A NOVEL BY

SARAH SCHOFIELD

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CHAPTER ONE

BACK HOME

"Ladies and Gentlemen we are starting our final descent into Portland International Airport. Please put your seats and tray tables in the upright position..."

I was so excited to hear those words. They meant I was one step closer to being home and near Lucas after three long weeks. We'd talked every day, at least two or three times, not to mention sending thousands of texts, but that wasn't the same as our daily snuggle sessions or our weekly picnics to one of our secret havens. I couldn't believe that after two days in California visiting my friends, I'd been ready to return to Myrtle Creek.

I figured I would be so busy with them that I wouldn't miss Lucas so much, but that old saying, "You can never really go home," certainly holds true. Nothing was the same. The locations were there; well, most of them—my favorite diner closed back in May. That was a bummer. The dance studio was still there. The mall was pretty much the same other than a few new stores. The biggest change of all was with my friends.

Shelby and her family moved after her visit to Myrtle Creek in June, which made my trip weird from the start. The three musketeers were broken up. I stayed with Kelly and her family while I was in SoCal.

As if that wasn't bad enough, some time before prom a feud started between Melanie and Zoe over a boy from another school. That's when the "Great Divide" started. Some of our group sided with Melanie, and the others sided with Zoe. Childish, I know. When I mentioned this to Kelly, her response was, "Well...you should see the guy."

Even so, if you asked me, I'd say it was his fault. He was the one dating both of them. At least that's the info I received from

Kelly and Shelby in June when they came to visit. I thought things would be patched up by the time I got there—fat chance. So, half of my vacation I spent with one group and the rest with the other. Kelly tried to stay neutral, but in the end she spent more time with Zoe.

Thankfully, my plane is about to land and I'm ready for two weeks of drama free bliss with Lucas before school starts. He finished helping his mom at her vet clinic last week. Since then he's been waiting for me to get back.

"Are you traveling for business or pleasure?" the little old lady next to me asked. I let out a little chuckle. I'm a teenager and she's asking if it's business or pleasure.

"I'm actually going home. I was visiting friends in California. How about you?"

"I'm visiting my daughter and her family."

"Well, you'll love Oregon; it's beautiful." Listen to me, a few months back I couldn't stand this place, and now I'm praising it.

"Oh, I know," she smiled. "I have six grandkids and I come out for every birthday."

"Wow, that's impressive."

"Well, it's love and tradition. I started with the first and it grew with each one. Now it's just a given that Grammy's gonna be there."

The plane made a steep decline and I felt butterflies in my stomach. The lady smiled and I returned the gesture before turning my attention out the window. I gazed at the golden glow in the night sky surrounding the city. Tiny bright lights grew and took the shape of headlights as the plane descended.

I felt the gears release the wheels. This was the part I hated. I clinched the arm rest and squeezed my eyes tight. I always dreaded the actual landing. To make it to your destination with no glitches and then have the worst happen as you land, I figured

that would be my luck, especially now that everything was going great for me.

Thump—Thump—Thump. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Portland International Airport. Please keep your seatbelts fastened until we stop at the gate..."

I made it! Even though the seatbelt light was still lit, I heard the clicking of passengers unfastening their belts. I did the same.

Why did I have to pick seat twenty-six A?

Mental Note: Being close to the bathroom isn't as important as getting off the plane faster. Next time I'll sit in aisle eight or nine.

"Have a great vacation," I told the little old lady as she slowly made her way into the aisle.

"Thank you, dear."

I was ready for my turn, but I decided to let the lady with three kids sitting behind me go first. Her oldest couldn't have been more than four or five. I offered my assistance when I realized she was alone. Brave, brave woman. She carried the baby on her hip and had held her toddler's hand. I helped with her carry-on bags.

"It never fails," she laughed. "I start with such organization, but by the time the trip is over the baby is short one shoe and the three year old is short a pigtail."

I laughed, not sure if she was joking or on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her double stroller was waiting for her as we stepped off the plane and into the passenger loading bridge. I patiently waited while she tied down, I mean, buckled the two youngest kids before taking her bags from me.

"Thanks so much for your help," she exhaled.

"Oh, it's no problem." I smiled and then headed toward the security check point. My mom was easy to spot in her bright red tank top. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. I scanned the crowd for Lucas. I couldn't believe he wasn't with my mom.

"Hi Honey," she waved. "I started wondering if you were even on the plane."

"Yeah, I helped a lady with kids." I scanned the crowd. "Where's Lucas?"

"Didn't you get his message? He couldn't come; something about helping his mom with a horse. I waited as long as I could before I had to come get you."

"Oh. I haven't turned on my phone."

"Sorry to disappoint you," she frowned.

"No, I'm glad to see you," I chuckled. "Did you get any sleep while I was gone?"

"Is that your way of saying, 'Hi Mom, I love you, but you look like crap'?"

"Sorry. I missed you and I'm so glad to be home. Oh, and by the way, 'Mom, I love you, and yes, you look like crap'."

"I didn't sleep well last night. I was too excited about you coming home." She ran her fingers through her hair. "It's been miserable without you these past three weeks."

"A little practice run—someday I'll be heading off to college," I joked as we walked to baggage claim. We stood by the carousel watching it slowly spit out one piece of luggage at a time.

"How many bags did you bring back?" Mom asked, scanning the bags looking for something familiar.

I dug for my cell phone, occasionally glancing at the stream of bags gliding around the carousel. "Two. The blue one I took with me and a red one I borrowed from Kelly."

"You must have done tons of school shopping while you were there."

"Yeah, but most of the red bag has things I left when we moved. Oh, there's the blue one," I said as it popped out the chute. "The red one should be coming soon."

"Is that the red one?" Mom said as she dragged the blue

suitcase off the belt.

I glanced up from digging for my phone. "Yeah."

Finally, I pulled the phone out of the last pocket. There were two messages and a text from Lucas. The first message he apologized profusely for not finishing in time to come with my mom. In the second, he said it would be way too late to see each other and he would see me the next morning. The text message had been sent about five minutes after I landed. "Welcome home, can't wait to see my girl!" I read the message over and over. He's so sweet.

I sent him a quick text back. "I made it to Portland in one piece and can't wait to see you too!"

"Eliana?" I turned to see who was calling my name. Sammy Alvarez stood next to the adjacent baggage carousel. He looked the same, except he had a better tan than mine. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I just got home from visiting my friends in California?" I shook my head shocked to see him. "What are you doing here?"

"I just got back from my uncle's place in Cabo. My sister and I were down there for a month." He walked over to my mom and helped pull the red bag off the moving belt. "Here you go, Mrs. Davis. You look like you were having trouble with that."

"Thanks," she smiled. "Leave it to my daughter to bring half of California back with her."

"Sorry, Mom," I grimaced as I turned my attention back to Sammy. "It's such a small world. We travel a lot and I never run into anyone I actually know at airports, especially this late at night."

"Yeah, well, this is a first for me too," he grinned. "But, hey, I better help my sister with our bags. I just wanted to say hi. I'll see you when school starts."

"Okay." I waved as he turned and walked away. "Sorry Mom, I got distracted trying to find my phone."

"That's okay. You can pull the heavy one to the car." I guess I deserved that. In fact, I would have pulled both of them if it got me home faster.

After the two hour flight, I had to endure an even longer three and a half hour drive to Myrtle Creek. Unfortunately, my flight had been delayed and we got to Portland an hour late. I offered to drive since mom looked so tired, but she insisted that she was all right. Once we made it onto I-5 the drive went smooth. It was a straight shot.

Mom filled the time by telling me all about her three long weeks without me. She'd kept busy booking senior photo sessions. After the fantastic prom pictures her plate was full. She'd averaged two sessions a day for the past five weeks. Lucas had booked his senior pictures the week before I got home. I wasn't too happy about that, but he said he would feel funny with me watching. I couldn't argue with that, I'd feel the same way.

We played twenty questions about my trip. Mom asked just about every question she could think of. How many days I spent at the beach? Did I visit my old dance studio? How many nights we went clubbing? Who was still there? And if I still wanted to move back? I barely had a chance to breathe between answers. The question about moving back had me puzzled.

"Did Dad get his next orders?" I asked.

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"I can't wait to know how close we'll be to Myrtle Creek."

"I don't know, I haven't heard anything from your dad about our next move," she grinned.

My eyes narrowed. "What's with the smile?"

"Honey, I'm smiling because I think it's cute the way you're so crazy about Mr. Andrews. It reminds me of your dad and me when we were your age."

"I'm a little anxious to find out where we're going. I

wouldn't mind Texas or California. Ideally, I want to stay here, but I know that's not an option."

"Yeah, but you can always fly out anytime you want and you can stay with Grandma and Gramps."

Our conversation was interrupted by the jingle of my ring tone. It was another text from Lucas, "Heading to bed, I need to help my mom in the morning, but I'll be over by 10A.M., wear a swimsuit."

We pulled into the driveway just after one. Other than a faint glow from the kitchen window, the house was dark.

"We can get your bags in the morning," Mom said, crawling out of the driver seat.

"I'll grab the blue bag. I need a few things out of it." I opened the back of her SUV and pulled out the bag. The easy part was dragging it to the side door. The challenge was getting it up the fifteen stairs—yes, fifteen, I counted—to my room. Even though my mom was exhausted, she pushed while I pulled. We pushed the bag against my closet door.

"Thanks, Mom" I whispered, careful not to wake my grandparents.

She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and kissed my cheek. "Welcome home, honey."

CHAPTER TWO

HEAT WAVE

I sprinted down the back stairs into the kitchen. My mom and grandmother sat at the table eating something mushy like oatmeal or grits. I grabbed an apple out of the fruit bowl in the center of the table.

My grandmother said, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Grandma.” I turned toward my mom. “Lucas and I are hanging out today. I think we’re swimming or something.” I took a bite out of my shiny Granny Smith.

“It’s a great day for swimming, the temperature is supposed to reach at least a hundred degrees. Make sure you drink enough water.” Mom took a bite of her mush.

I swallowed my apple. “A hundred degrees—this place gets that hot?”

Mom nodded.

“Where’s Gramps?” I took another bite of my apple and grabbed a few bottles of water to tuck in my tote bag with my beach towels.

“Oh, he’s resting. You can see him when you get back.” Mom sipped her tea.

“Okay. I have my phone if you need me.” I tossed my tote bag over my shoulder. “I’m going to wait for Lucas on the porch.”

“Have a good time, honey.” Mom said.

My bare feet brushed across the porch as I glided back and forth on the swing. It was already warm and I wished for even the slightest breeze. I glanced at my phone and the time read 10:10 A.M. My eyes were locked on the mountain leading to the Andrews’ farm. A dark truck popped around the bend. It had to be him.

The truck slowed and the blinker went on in front of the driveway. I was up and running before Lucas closed his door. I threw my arms around him catching him off guard. The impact sent us spiraling onto the grass.

“I missed you,” I squealed, engulfing him with thousands of tiny kisses.

“Wow! Was the trip really that bad?” he cupped my chin and guided my gaze to his.

“You have no idea.”

“I missed you, too. This is all I could think about the last three weeks.” His lips met mine.

Shivers ran down my spine as he caressed my hair. “Same here.”

Lucas sat up. “Come on. Let’s do something.”

“What do you want to do?” I asked, as he pulled me to my feet.

“Just spend the day with my girl.” He entwined his fingers with mine. “Jack said something yesterday about everyone meeting down by the river. I was thinking the water would be refreshing since it’s going to be so hot today. Besides, Rachel will be there and it’ll be one of the last times we see her before she leaves.”

“When is she leaving?” Lucas’ cousin Rachel was on her way to Oregon State.

“She leaves this weekend.”

“I guess we should definitely make an appearance then.”

Lucas pulled his truck behind the last vehicle along the road. I slid across his seat and he helped me out. Hip-hop music played in the distance. Lucas led the way with my tote bag in one hand and my hand in his other. We followed the worn dirt path in the direction of music.

When we reached the river we were greeted by everyone. It

looked like all the new seniors along with a handful of last years were gathered along the water. Picnic tables had been moved under trees to cover them with some sort of shade. Inflatable floating docks were scattered along the river. Girls ran around in their bikinis as guys chased them with water guns. An old tire hung from a huge tree limb with a line of people forming behind it. The heat was becoming unreal and I was thankful for the lightweight sundress that didn't cling to my skin.

Lucas led me through the crowd to a picnic table with Jack, Casey, and Rachel. I watched a guy from my English class from last year swing out over the water. When he reached maximum height, he sprung off the tire doing a back flip before making a huge splash.

"Is that water deep enough to dive into?" I asked.

Lucas looked toward the tire swing. "Oh, yeah, this is like the deepest spot. That's why it's the best hang out. Usually it's packed with families with little kids. I guess we took it over for the day."

"Hey, the dynamic duo is back. Lucas can stop moping around now." Jack hollered from a picnic bench, his arm wrapped around Casey's waist.

"Very funny, man." Lucas shook his head.

"Jack, leave him alone. I think it was cute how he wandered around like a lovesick puppy," Rachel laughed.

"Geez." Lucas rubbed the back of his head. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

Lucas squirmed next to me. Obviously, he wasn't comfortable with where this conversation was going, and I had to admit, neither was I. I needed to think of something to change the subject. "Have you guys been in the water yet?"

Casey rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Jack took a turn on the tire swing. He wanted to attempt flying like Superman. The only thing he accomplished was an awkward belly flop."

“I told you, I meant to do that.” Jack shrugged.

Everyone at the table busted out laughing.

Casey snorted. “Right, that’s why you had tears in your eyes when you came out of the water and said, quote unquote, that your skin was on fire.”

“I just came out of the water, my face was wet. I didn’t have tears,” Jack clarified. “At least I attempted something. I’m not afraid to get my hair wet.”

Lucas entwined his fingers with mine and gave my hand a little squeeze. We slid onto the bench next to Rachel.

Casey huffed, “Hey, that’s not fair. I said I would try it later, I just don’t want to look like a drowned rat so early in the day.”

“Babe, you couldn’t look like a drowned rat if you tried.” Jack winked.

Casey cheeks had a tint of pink. “Well, maybe if the line gets smaller I’ll go. Until then, I’m going to enjoy this shade.”

Rachel bumped my shoulder. “So, how was Cali?”

“It was all right. I mean, it was good to see my friends and the old stomping ground, but it just didn’t feel the same.”

“It looks like you made it to the beach quite a bit.”

I looked at my legs. “Yeah, that was the best part of the trip.”

“So, by the sound of it, you’re glad to be back?” Casey asked.

“Yeah.”

Lucas placed his hand on my leg and flinched when he touched bare skin. “Oh, man,” he said. Everyone turned to him and waited. He quickly said, “Um, dude, you up for a chance to redeem yourself on the tire?”

When Jack stood, a hint of red lingered over his abs. “There’s nothing to redeem. Other than the landing, the Superman was flawless.”

Casey snorted, “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Lucas stood and peeled his T-shirt off exposing his newly defined abs. WOW! I knew he was working out, but oh my. He placed his T-shirt next to me and kissed my cheek. “Be right back.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” I smirked, trying to look unfazed by his appearance and his reaction when he touched my leg.

Casey grabbed Jack’s hand. “Like Eliana said, don’t hurt yourself.”

“Hardy, Har, Har,” Jack said, following behind Lucas to the end of the line.

I couldn’t help but notice the looks Lucas got from girls as he passed by. Several double takes captured my attention. He was already great looking with his amazing aqua eyes and unbelievable smile, but the summer had done his body good. His sun-kissed skin made his eyes stand out along with his abs. He was pure perfection, and I wasn’t the only one that noticed.

“Eliana, do you think you will attempt the tire swing?” Rachel asked.

I watched a girl leap off the tire and enter the water cannonball style. “I guess if Casey does it, I can too. What about you?”

“I suppose I can attempt it.”

“Hey girlies.” I turned to see Sasha standing at the end of our table. The girl who had made my life hell stood there trying to be civil. I guess people can change. Well, at least their appearance. Her hair was blonder and her skin had an orange tint. She was either hitting the tanning bed or using one of those cheap tinted lotions. Either way, she’d gone completely overboard. She flipped her hair to one side. “How was your summer?”

“It was good,” Casey said.

Rachel shrugged. “I’ve been busy packing for school.”

Sasha smiled. “Rachel, you’re so lucky to be finished with

high school. I can't wait to get through this year." She turned her attention to me. "Eliana, I heard you were moving back to California or something like that."

I shook my head forcing a smile, "Nope, I just went for a visit. I'm not moving anytime soon. I'll be at South Umpqua for at least the next year."

"Oh, that's great," she grinned. By the tone of her voice, it was the furthest thing from the truth. "Maybe we'll have some classes together."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Sasha." Someone called from several tables over.

She turned and put her index finger up. "Well, I should go; I just wanted to say hey. Rachel, if I don't see you before you leave, have fun at school. And don't worry; the squad is in safe hands." She winked. "Bye girlies."

"Bye," we all said in unison.

She turned on her wedge heels, glared at the table behind us before strutting toward her table.

Rachel and I turned to the table to see a group of football players, including Evan, flirting with some giggling girls I recognized from school.

"What was that all about?" Casey shook her head.

"My thoughts exactly." I rolled my eyes.

"Maybe it had something to do with her break up with Evan," Rachel shrugged.

"Wait. They broke up?" I asked. I was shocked. Evan had caused so much drama for me last year, before and during prom. Not to mention, Sasha had had her sights on Lucas even though she was with Evan. I could only imagine what she had up her sleeve now that she was single. No wonder she wanted to know if I was moving.

"Yeah, I guess she ended things a few weeks ago at a bonfire when she caught Evan with a sophomore from another

school,” Rachel explained.

“Maybe she’s changed her ways.” Casey shrugged. “Not likely, but stranger things have happened.”

“I guess.” I searched the line for the tire swing. Lucas was easy to spot. He was laughing at something Jack said. By the looks of their hand gestures, they were talking about football. Most likely one of our flag football games earlier in the summer. He raised his arm like he was going to toss a ball. He caught me watching and winked. I waved and he waved back, motioning for us to join them in line.

I turned. “Are you two ready for the swing? Lucas is holding a spot for us.”

“I guess it’s now or never,” Rachel smiled.

“Ditto,” Casey stood and took off her sundress exposing her soft salmon colored bikini. After last year when she’d found her prom dress in that color, she’d declared that it was her new favorite color.

Rachel slipped off her shorts and tank top to reveal her aqua bikini. Whistles and hoots came from the table of football players behind us. “Please, like these boys have never seen a girl in a bikini.”

Casey smirked. “They have, just none that fill out a bikini like you do.”

I turned toward the line.

“Eliana, are you going in with your dress on?” Rachel asked.

“Oh,” I paused. “I thought I’d take it off when we got closer to the water.”

“There are so many people over there, you might lose it. It would be safer if you left it here.” Rachel tucked her clothes in her beach bag.

“I guess you’re right.” I cringed. I hated unwanted attention and the table with Evan and the other guys was the epitome of unwanted attention. I took a deep breath and pulled my straps off

my shoulders and slid my dress off.

Hoots and whistles erupted from the football table. Some ogre, I'm pretty sure it was Evan, said "I knew Andrews was a lucky bastard, but damn she's fine."

I focused on Casey, pretending not to hear the comments and gestures. "Ready when you are."

Casey led the way through the crowd toward Jack and Lucas. Rachel followed behind me.

Lucas had his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes were focused on Evan's table. By the scowl on his face, I realized that he'd witnessed the whole incident.

Jack was no different. His jaw was locked. Casey ran up and leap in his arms, wrapping her short legs around him. "Hey babe, Can I be your Supergirl?"

I had to hand it to Casey; she knew how to divert a situation. I, on the other hand, wasn't about to wrap my legs around Lucas. He'd practically freaked out touching my bare leg. Instead, I walked up and grabbed his hands pulling them away from his chest. "Forget about them, they're buffoons."

He finally tore his eyes from the guys and looked at me. He caught his breath. I couldn't help but grin. That good, huh. That one small action made my day, and I felt confident. Sasha can be single and all these other girls can stare at my man like he's eye candy, but at the end of the day, he only has eyes for me.

He smiled, "I finally get to see your polka dot bikini. It's definitely my favorite outfit."

Rachel laughed, "Oh, please. Lucas, you can wipe the drool off your chin now."

I didn't take my eyes off his. "That's okay. He's allowed." Although we were only holding hands, it was enough.

"Okay cheese balls the line's moving. Can we move with it?" Jack nudged Lucas' shoulder.

Casey was still wrapped around Jack as we inched our way

to the front. The water looked more inviting as we stood under the sun. Halfway through the line, Rachel ran to the cooler and grabbed bottles of water for everyone.

“This better be worth it.” Casey wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“Oh, it will be worth it.” Jack whispered something in her ear and she giggled. I don’t even want to know.

Lucas squeezed my hand. “Have you ever jumped off a tire swing before?”

I shrugged. “Not a tire swing, but I’ve swung on a rope—” Lucas pulled me into him and wrapped his arms around me to steady the both of us as a guy landed at our feet gripping a Frisbee. My face and chest were against Lucas’ bare sweaty chest. Oh. My. God. Please don’t flinch. I will be mortified. His hands were against the small of my back. “—into water before.”

“Sorry about that.” The guy on the ground hopped to his feet and ran back to his game.

“Are you alright?” Lucas asked. He hadn’t moved. No flinch, nothing. I listened to the rapid beat of his heart thumping through his chest.

“I’m good.” I’m really good. “Thanks.” A surge of electricity traveled through my body and thousands of goose bumps came to the surface. I prayed Lucas didn’t notice, and if he did, I hoped he wouldn’t say anything.

Casey met my eyes and smiled. “Geez, people should watch what they’re doing.”

The line moved, and I was reluctant to pull away, but if I didn’t it would have been awkward for us to walk. I took a deep breath and separated my body from his. When I got the courage to make eye contact I was welcomed with a smile. Oh, he felt my goose bumps.

After half an hour or so, our group slowly made it to the front of the line.

“Rachel, you want to go first,” Jack asked.

“Sure. It will give you guys a chance to see how it’s really done.”

Casey giggled.

“Then, by all means, show us.” Lucas stepped aside to let her pass.

Rachel climbed to the top of the tire. “Don’t blink, it will be over fast.” Two guys pulled the tire back and shoved it with force. Rachel pumped her legs to gain height. After a few good pumps, she kicked off the tire executing a flip and entered the water with her toes pointed, causing little to no splash. She came up and wiped her hair out of her face. “And that’s how it’s done,” she yelled.

“Show off.” Jack hollered. He finally let Casey down and said, “I’ll wait for you in the water.”

Casey smiled, “Be careful this time.”

Jack took off running before jumping onto the tire. He pumped his legs and at maximum height leapt off the tire extending his arms like Superman.

“Oh, geez, he’s going to flop again,” Casey whispered.

He gave himself just enough time to bring in his knees and executed a gigantic cannonball causing water to spray the people on the edge of the river, including Casey, Lucas and myself.

“Great job, Superman,” Casey cheered when Jack surfaced.

Jack swam away from the drop zone. “Your turn, Babe. I’ll wait for you right here.”

Casey giggled as her petite frame climbed on the tire. “It’s bigger than I expected.”

“You’ll do great,” I encouraged her.

The two guys pulled her back and when they let go she shrieked. She didn’t bother gaining height or speed. As the tire extended out she jumped off and grabbed her knees. Her cheeks puffed out like she was holding her breath as she entered the

water. She popped up, hollering, “I did it. I really did it.”

Jack swam over. “Did you have doubts?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and laughed. “Actually, yeah.”

Jack turned toward us, “We’ll meet you at the table in a bit.” They swam around the bend out of the drop zone and out of sight.

Lucas looked at me. “You want to go first?”

“Um, sure.” I shrugged. I felt unsure about the whole thing, but I figured if Casey could leap off the tire, I could too. I wasn’t afraid of jumping. I was afraid of a belly flop. The one time I’d jumped off a rope I’d landed head first sideways in the water—kind of like a side flop. It was definitely not graceful. I’d had a migraine the rest of the day.

I stepped onto the tire and gripped the rope as tight as I could. You can do this. My body started to tremble.

One of the guys holding the tire glanced at Lucas and turned back to me. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” My teeth were chattering.

Lucas walked over and placed his hands on the sides of my face. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I’m fine. Really. I’m just nervous.”

He kissed my forehead. “Remember, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath.

Lucas stepped aside. The two guys pulled the tire back and thrust me forward. I pumped my legs. When I was high enough to execute a cannonball I shoved off the tire, grabbed me knees with one arm, and plugged my nose with my other hand. When I felt the chill of the water close in over me I pushed toward the surface. Breaking through with a grin, I swiped water from my eyes in time to see Lucas grab the tire. I pushed myself back and swam out of the drop zone.

Lucas hollered, “You did great! Don’t move I’ll be right there.” He took off running and leapt onto the tire. He pumped his legs a few times and within seconds he did a back flip off the tire entering the water head first. He didn’t surface immediately.

My heart raced and I started to swim toward his entry point but he broke through the water in front of me.

“You scared me.” I slapped his arm.

“Sorry.” He wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me against him.

My heart sped up as his rock hard chest pressed against mine. “Oh, now you want to touch me.” I playfully shoved him.

“What are you talking about?” he smirked.

“I don’t know, maybe it has something to do with you freaking out at the table when you touched my leg. What was that?” I wrapped an arm around his neck and trace little circles on his chest.

He gently grabbed my hand. “You really need to stop that. It’s getting harder to restrain myself around you.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh.” I pulled my hand out of his and tried to push away.

He held my waist, making it impossible for me to separate our bodies. “I can handle this.”

He leaned in and our lips met. My skin tingled and I pulled him closer.

Our kiss was cut short when we were sprayed with water from a massive cannonball.

I laughed, “I think that’s our cue to head back to the table.” I placed both my hands on his shoulders and shoved him under water. I didn’t think it all the way through, he still had his arm around my waist and I went down with him.

We broke through the surface and inhaled deep breaths. “Nice try, Hun. Next time make sure I don’t have a grip on you.” He kissed the tip of my nose and removed his arm from my

waist.

“Okay. I’ll remember that.” I swam backwards toward shore and Lucas followed.

I came out of the water first and squeezed the water out of my hair while I waited for Lucas.

Sasha and some of the other girls from the cheer squad were laying along the shore on towels in a straight row. Sasha was propped up on her elbows watching the water, or more like Lucas walking out of the water. “Hey, Lucas.” She moved her sunglasses to the tip of her nose.

Hello, I’m right here and you are openly gawking at my man.

“Hey.” Lucas shook his hands though his hair removing the water.

“Are you looking forward to senior year? Can you believe we are almost done?” She smiled.

“Yep.” He ran up to me and without warning, lifted me over his shoulder and smacked my butt. “Let’s go, babe.”

I wasn’t expecting that and I squealed. He. Just. Smacked. My. Butt.

Lucas trotted toward our table effortlessly and sat me down. Then he grabbed my tote bag and removed the beach towels we had brought with us. He moved around like nothing slightly out of the ordinary had just happened.

I remained silent. I wasn’t sure if it was shock, excitement, or a mixture of both. I mean, he smacked my butt.

He caught me watching him, cleared his throat and slowly handed me a towel. He glanced to his right and then back at me.

I turned my head and realized that Rachel, wrapped in a towel, was sitting at the table with a mini bag of Cheetos in her hand and a half-eaten Cheeto pressed between her index finger and thumb. Her wide-eyed expression meant she’d seen the whole thing.

I turned my attention back to Lucas. He was wiping his chest and arms.

I hopped off the table and wiped my body down before wrapping the towel around my mid-section. I sat back where he had placed me.

Rachel stood. "I'm going to get a drink. Do you two want anything?"

"Yeah, I'll take a bottle of water," I said.

"That sounds good. I'll have one, too," Lucas said, placing his towel next to my bag.

"So," I paused.

He stepped in front of me, placing his hands on both side of me on the table. "Look, I'm really sorry about that. I just wanted to make it clear to her that I'm not interested."

"Oh, I think you made it clear," I laughed.

"You're not mad?"

"Mad—no, surprised—yes." I ran my fingers through his hair and leaned into him gently pressing my lips against his.

His hands moved from the table to my waist and then slowly up my back and into my hair as our kiss intensified.

Public displays of affection weren't something we did, but I didn't care. In fact, this was huge. For the first time Lucas was showing the world what I really meant to him.

Rachel returned with the bottles of water. "Here you go."

Lucas slowly pulled away. "Thanks, Rach."

"Yeah, thanks." I grabbed a bottle out of her hand. "Your dive was impressive."

"Years of practice," she shrugged. "When we were younger, all of us cousins used to come here almost every day during the summer and try to out dive one another. That's why this guy is just as good."

Lucas shook his head.

Jack came around the tree with Casey on his back. "So,

Rachel, what you're saying is that you cheated?"

"How is that cheating? I told you I would show you how it's done, and I did," she smirked.

Casey kissed Jack's cheek. "You had the best cannonball. Not many people can fly like Superman and have enough time to enter the water cannonball style."

Rachel snorted, "Yeah, there's a fifty-fifty chance you'll make it. Fifty percent of the time people end up belly-flopping."

"Hardy, Har, Har. You ladies are so full of jokes today." Jack sat Casey on the table.

She grabbed her sundress out of her bag and slid it on. "We're heading out. I've had about all the sun I can take for one day."

"Okay, you're coming over next Thursday for your senior pictures, right?" I asked.

"Of course, do you think you could come over Wednesday to help with my clothes?"

"I'd love to help. We'll make it a girls' night."

"Sounds like a plan."

Rachel grabbed her bag and dug her keys out. "I'm heading out too. I still have a few more things to pack."

Casey leaned over and embraced Rachel in a hug. "I don't think I'll get a chance to see you before you go. I'm going to miss you. You're coming home for Thanksgiving, right?"

Rachel hugged her back. "Yeah, I'll be home. We'll make plans to meet at the bowling alley or something."

"Sounds good." Casey picked her bag up off the table and took Jack's hand. "See you guys later."

"Bye," I said.

Lucas waved.

Rachel looked at him, "So, I'm not saying good bye to you two because I'll see you at the barbeque on Friday."

"Barbeque?" I asked.

“Don't tell me you didn't invite her?” Rachel snapped.

“I haven't really had a chance.” He turned toward me. “We're having a family barbeque for a farewell dinner since Rachel's leaving Saturday. Would you like to come?”

“It's a family thing. I would feel out of place.”

Rachel scrunched her nose. “Nonsense, Aunt Carrie, already thinks of you as family. She was the one that added your name to the guest list.”

I looked at Lucas and he nodded.

“I guess I'll be there then.”

“Great, see you two later.” Rachel waved, heading in the direction of the cars.

I hopped off the table and grabbed my dress out of my tote bag. “I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go too.”

“Yeah, let's get out of here.” Lucas leaned over me reaching for his T-shirt on the bench. My heart rate sped up as his chest pressed against me. He pulled back and I watched him slide his shirt over his head.

He's right; this is getting hard. I removed my damp towel and slipped my dress on.

Lucas draped the towels over his arm and lifted my tote bag while I put on my flip flops.

When we passed the table of football players, Evan piped up, “Andrews that handbag is a good color for you.”

The table of guys roared with “Ooh's and Damn's”

Lucas stopped.

Oh, God. Please don't start something.

He turned toward their table. “Here's a little advice for you guys. Holding a bag like this—” he lifted the bag in his hand, “gets you a lady like this.” He raised our entwined hands. “Have a good night, fellas.”

The table went quiet.

I smiled because that's all I could think to do. I was so proud

of Lucas because he didn't start something and he'd called me a lady.

We followed the same dirt trail back to his truck. He turned his head toward me. "I had a great time today. Did you have fun?"

"Yes. I can't believe I actually jumped off a tire. I don't know if you noticed it or not, but I was slightly nervous."

"No, I didn't notice."

"You're a bad liar." I bumped his arm with my shoulder.

We reached his truck and he helped me in. "I have to help my mom for a few hours so I'll take you home."

"Do you want to do something tonight?"

"Yeah, I'll call you when I'm done."